

# Persons with Disabilities and the UCC

On Independence Day, July 4, 1977, the 11th General Synod of the United Church of Christ called "each local congregation ... to take affirmative action assuring the full integration of persons with handicaps into membership of the Christian fellowship at all levels." Over the next several years, the General Synod affirmed nearly 30 times the full participation in the life of the church of persons with disabilities. In 1985, the General Synod again called on local churches and others to meet "the needs of persons with disabilities by working with them" and including "persons with disabilities in all aspects of the life of the church." Although the church is open to all people, male and female, slave and free, it has not always been open to people with disabilities.

## History and Background

In Mark 2:1-12 when Jesus was in Capernaum, four friends of a paralyzed man carried their friend to Jesus to be healed. The crowd around the door would not let them in, perhaps because of their fears or uncomfortable feelings. The friends did not give up. Instead they went to the roof, took it apart and let their friend down into Jesus' presence. Jesus healed the man and forgave his sins, for in the ancient world illnesses or disabilities were associated with sin. That is not what Jesus said about the blind person in John, however. He said, "Neither this man nor his parents

sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:3).

God calls us by grace as an unearned gift, not because of our wholeness or goodness, for we all "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Our United Church of Christ ancestors in this country pioneered in mission for people with disabilities of body and mind. For example, the Evangelical Synod of North America founded Emmaus Home in Marthasville, Missouri, in 1893 for those with mental retardation. The United Church of Christ today supports institutional ministries serving people with debilitating disabilities.

In the spirit and practice of Jesus, we should seek to bring and keep persons with disabilities in the mainstream of our communities and our churches. While churches are not required to follow the public accommodations regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act signed in 1990 which went into effect in 1992, the act should be a guide for churches.

Along with opening up our churches to let people with disabilities in, churches can and should step out as advocates for the people with disabilities in their communities, including employment by the church.

## Common Practices

Forty percent of every community is made up of people with disabilities.

They include people in wheelchairs, people who are deaf, who are blind, who have chronic infirmities of advancing age, who are developmentally disabled, and people overcome by emotional stress and its resulting illnesses, visible and invisible disabilities.

Yet, in most churches much less than 12 percent of the congregation are people with disabilities. In part that is because our buildings say, "We haven't provided for you" which is heard as "We don't want you." Even a few steps can keep out a person in a wheelchair who would prefer not to be in the jarring and demeaning position of being lifted over the steps. When services are mostly spoken, the person who is deaf is left out.

The first step to opening churches to people with disabilities is to understand our history and our attitudes, and then work together to make our churches inviting and accessible.

## Opening Minds and Doors

"I think of myself as being inconvenienced, not disabled," says Debbie Phillips, a city commissioner and an active laywoman, who uses a wheelchair, but is not confined to it any more than anyone else is confined to an automobile. But how do we think of people like Debbie Phillips?

The first barrier to the integration of people with disabilities into churches and communities is mental. People who are "inconvenienced" such as

Debbie have been made to feel unwanted by insensitivity as well as by intent or neglect.

People sometimes are embarrassed or impatient when people are present whose slurred speech or physical limitations remind them of their own frailty and vulnerability. It helps to understand that everyone has disabilities of one kind or another and to learn to accept each person's limits and abilities.

By working to help people with disabilities gain access to the church, the church can gain access to the full range of their gifts. People with disabilities can teach Sunday school, preach, direct camps, play games and run churches and businesses. It may be attitudinal barriers rather than any architectural barriers that keep them out. When people can accept their own limitations and fears of disability, they will find that the faith and acceptance in Christ already make us one. Jesus, whose body was broken unto death, shows Christians that spiritual unity is greater than any physical weakness or loss. The victory that heals us and binds us together as one has already been won.

While mental barriers may prevent people with disabilities from wanting to be in churches, physical barriers make it impossible for some people with disabilities to enter and participate in many churches. Although every church cannot breakdown all physical barriers and meet all the needs of all people with disabilities, every church should be considering what it can do.

## Ways to Remove Mental Barriers

- Use Access Sunday worship resources. They can be found at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) in the worship folder, under Worship Ways.
- Contact the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries and the United Church of Christ Mental Illness Network for further information regarding persons with disabilities and the church, at Local Church Ministries, 700 Prospect Ave, Cleveland OH 44115. Call toll free 1-866-822-8224.
- Order (free of charge) **That All May Worship and Serve**, a packet of information to help your church become accessible to all, at 1-800-736-2206 (Parish Life and Leadership, Disabilities Ministry.)
- Order **Anybody, Everybody, Christ's Body** a congregational study program aimed at preparing a congregation to claim itself as an Accessible to All (A2A) congregation.
- Read **The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability** by Nancy L. Eiesland, Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Read **Human Disability and the Service of God** by Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers, Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Set up a task force to study the scriptures to see what the message is for Christians about people with disabilities and to prepare members

to be advocates for action in the church and community.

- Have a series of presentations by people with disabilities. If your building has physical barriers, you may have to find another place to meet. For speakers, contact the National Committee on Persons with Disabilities or people from your community.
- Have a simulation to see how it feels to be disabled. Try planning a meal for a group in your church and let people draw "disabilities" from a hat. Borrow equipment such as wheelchairs. After the people with disabilities help prepare and serve the meal, discuss their experience and feelings about it.
- Promote "Access Sunday," a time set aside to remind the congregation of the need for access.
- Work with others in your community on hiring practices.

## Ways to Remove Physical Barriers

- Find out what your local building codes are for barrier-free construction.
- Build ramps into and inside your church.
- Install elevators, or a combination of lifts and elevators, in multilevel buildings.
- Reserve convenient parking for the people with disabilities.
- Increase and improve the lighting in all parts of the church.

- Provide a strong public address system, free of distortion.
- Interpret worship services and meetings in sign language.
- Offer special transportation for people with disabilities.
- Print worship and study materials in large type.
- Encourage your church library to purchase large-print materials.
- Promote classes and programs for people who are developmentally disabled.
- Develop Braille resources with other churches and social service agencies.
- Move the pews farther apart or remove pews to make room for wheelchairs.
- Make restrooms and their fixtures accessible to all.
- Have a willingness to try new forms of worship that are open to more people. This may mean changes in the amount of reading, standing or kneeling or the way communion is administered.

## Issues Facing the Church

- For some churches, elimination of some physical barriers is virtually impossible because of cost and the construction of the building. What can these churches do to make people with disabilities feel welcome?
- The terminology referring to people with disabilities has varied.

Some people prefer "differently abled" to "disabled." Most feel strongly that "persons with disabilities or handicaps" is preferable to "the disabled" or "the handicapped" because they are first and foremost people. What do you use and why?

## Questions

- What does your church building say to people with disabilities?
- What has your church done to be more accessible?
- Has your church ever called together people in the church with disabilities to ask about their needs?
- What is one thing your church could do to be more accessible physically? Attitudinally?